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THE ROUNDABOUT RIOTS

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taken from Verso

France, having bequeathed to the world *left* and *right* as political concepts, now seems intent on exploring the dynamics of a situation in which the longstanding spectrum no longer functions according to custom. At that level of abstraction, the topography there is now something like an isosceles triangle. The right belongs to *Rassemblement national* and worse, having radicalized itself along a nationalist course. Having suffered through the Pasokification that has eroded *Parti Socialiste*, a lefter left remains by default. Both are condemned to oppose the technocratic center in ways that seem to set them in a formal alliance: both national chauvinists and those who can still recall the clarion calls of communism and anarchism necessarily oppose a shared enemy. Once out the front door, however, they are repeatedly compelled to fight each other out in the streets in moments of direct combat that cut out the middleman, né Macron. This triangular drama begins to suggest why the uprising of the Gilets Jaunes has proved so chaotic and, from a distance (perhaps up close as well), so hard to parse. Many participants declare themselves apolitical, living downwardly mobile lives in the middle of the triangle, averse to the seductions of any party promises. Meanwhile, if it is about gas prices and the collapse of purchasing power, why are there melees between fascists and antifascist fighters? Each position must struggle with both of the other vertices of the triangle in wars of position and in street fights of maneuver. And this too is a simplifying schematic. Wisdom demands that I leave the detailing of the uprising's striated social forces to those with greater local experience.

In addition to the actors composing a complicated field, the forms and phenomena of the movement have proved puzzling. The Parisian collective *Plateforme d'Enquêtes Militantes* writes, "A battlefield: this describes the movement that has gripped France for the past few weeks, insofar as it is traversed by a social composition and political themes – taxation and buying power – that break with our classic interpretive grids." In the United States, the *Chicago Reader* offers a far more direct confusion: "What Chicago could learn from Paris's massive labor protests." It is worth noting that the Gilets Jaunes uprising is not exclusively or even fundamentally Parisian. It is also not a labor protest.

Circulation and Subsistence

There is little reason to be confused; the Gilets Jaunes movement has in its form developed with laboratorial clarity. It is a

textbook riot. A labor protest, to state the obvious, features labor-based demands, workers in their role as workers fighting to set the price and conditions of their labor — an action unfolding in the context of production, the provision of goods and services, the creation of value. The classical riot as it arises in medieval and early modern Europe is the form of collective action that

- 1) *struggles to set the price of market goods;*
- 2) *features participants with no necessary kinship but their dispossession;*
- 3) *unfolds in the context of consumption, featuring the interruption of commercial circulation.*

In the 14th through the 18th centuries this commonly involved a community mobilization directing itself at a baker or more often grain merchant, demanding they sell their goods locally and affordably. It was a struggle in the marketplace over the cost of self-reproduction. It will be obvious that the Gilets Jaunes movement follows this protocol quite closely. Not because it is violent and disorderly, insulting the propriety of the state — the bourgeois measure of riot — but because it begins with and sustains itself on the demand that a subsistence good must be sold at a lower price for proletarian reproduction to continue. It is a sign that the customary compact between classes is in crisis. The bread riot has returned.

Except that it has not gone anywhere. In particular, riots over the costs of compulsory transport are a fixture of the present, from the withdrawal of fuel subsidies that provoked nationwide riots in Haiti to the repeated *gasolinazo* protests of Mexico and elsewhere to the insurrectionary force unleashed by an increase in bus fares in Brazil. Once transportation becomes a necessity for survival, its costs become part of the subsistence package and a site of contest. The focus has been relentless. “Roundabout protests,” one participant calls the actions on a road outside Toulouse. The protestors gather there to block traffic. Elsewhere they attack tollbooths, auto makers — all the physical manifestations of circulation.



However, a riot is a “circulation struggle” in a deeper sense than a simple focus on transport. At this far end of industrial and manufacturing growth in the overdeveloped west, the rise of the circulation struggle marks the weakness of traditional labor movements and the restructuring of class and capital at national and international scales. In its formal sense, “circulation” designates a related grouping of phenomena: the market, or more broadly the social arena in which the transfer of ownership and in turn consumption of goods and services; the real movement of commodities through the market and toward consumption after they are produced; and the kinds of work that circulate these commodities, realizing their value.

The circulation struggle captures the social contest of those pushed out of production as production itself slows and capital, in search of profit, leaps into strategies increasingly centered in Marx’s “noisy sphere of circulation.” The characters assembled in this journalistic account are telling. It begins, as it must, not at a work site but a market, a town far from Paris with its own roundabout, its own contingent of yellow vests. They include an unemployed electrical lineman, an overnight nurse, a self-employed carpet-layer, a cement hauler. This captures a certain array: the remnants of construction, the stagnant service sector, the precarious and the cast aside. It is not that they do not work — some do, some do not — but that it is hard to imagine the labor struggle that could unite such disparate types across a region or nation. The cost of things however is beggaring them all. Price-setting it is.

The Struggle Within the Struggle

And yet we must also reckon with what that article elides. Beginning the story in *la France profonde*, locating the movement’s roots in the presumptively white provinces against the arrogant and elite classes of the metropole, both gestures toward and shies away from the extent to which the purportedly leaderless movement was both formed by, and gives prominence to nationalists hostile to the immigrant populations that gather in the banlieues around the cities — a truth evident within one well-

circulated list of demands. This provides an avenue for the party of Le Pen to seize the initiative for the elections of 2022, assuming the present government does not collapse before then; Macron's departure is now the leading cry, France's version of "the people want the fall of the regime." We know all too well the catastrophe of settling for this sort of spectacular decapitation, at best a show of strength, at risk of trivial replacement, and at worst an opening for a budding dictator.

The quest to discover the true subject of an insurrection always misses the variegations within the crowd. City dwellers and banlieusards have been present from the outset. Moreover, it is not the case that the French peripheries comprise a uniform populism with no commitments other than consumer shortfalls; this is simply what brings together actors with disparate concerns. People arrive at the movement without a direction, or with a hesitant intuition, and the events function as a sort of school for them. *The inciting occasion of a riot, a movement, an uprising, is never identical with its meaning.* Since the outset there has been a struggle within the struggle, a contest over its direction; it is always in this encounter that revolutionary possibility lives. While we are familiar with street movements drifting right — Brazil provides a disastrous example — the Gilets Jaunes have seemed to reverse this course at moments over the duration of disturbances, particularly as the weekly calls for Saturday convergences have meant a certain urbanization and have moved toward a broader proletarian base, including actors such as the Adama Committee. "The Truth and Justice for Adama Traoré committee" formed after Traoré's 2016 death in police custody north of Paris — an event which sparked riots identical in kind if not scale to the three weeks of rioting that, in 2005, leapt from Clichy-sous-Bois to encircle Paris, landing in suburbs across France and beyond.

The "race riot" (per its anglophone misnomer) or "suburban riot" initiated by state violence against subordinated communities, in Europe consistently immigrant communities, appears immediately as the opposite number to the Gilets Jaunes uprising. These are the two sides of the circulation struggle: on the one hand riots of those excluded from the wage, on the other, riots of those whose wages no longer purchase what is needed — paired phenomena of stagnant and declining production wherein the wage and wage discipline no longer stabilize the political economic situation. Like true opposite numbers, they meet each other over and over. One could do worse than develop a balance sheet of the present by pausing over the relations of these two circulation struggles.

Against Green Nationalism

Both riots, no matter their inciting event, cannot help but raise the matters of immigration, borders. economic nationalism, and so on. This is a corollary to the rise of circulation struggles: as the waning production and class recomposition to which they testify confronts and entangles with xenophobia, they are certain to place national chauvinism on the table. There is no serious left politics available which is not antiracist from the outset.

It is no less apparent that movements must increasingly orient themselves according to ecological catastrophe. A novelty of the Gilets Jaunes conflict lies in the state's wielding of purported ecological concerns so as to transfer social costs of reproduction to its subjects. This seems a grim but accurate forecast; it is all too easy to imagine eco-logic in the overdeveloped nations becoming a state tool toward austerity projects. In this sense it is an absolute error to understand the demand against the gas premium as anti-ecological. In so far as the state functions as capital's coordinating committee — and nothing about this has changed — it will remain impossible to take the side of civilizational survival by allowing "ecology" to become a state weapon. Seizing this weapon from state must also be a primary task for the left.



Here we see the force of the yellow vests themselves. A state requirement on behalf of safety, they return as a warning that the state is unsafe. This is nothing if not an ecological allegory regarding who will be charged with assuring safety and survival: state or people? The dramatic reversal highlights all the more brightly the ironic development wherein the movement, comprising we are told millions of irate drivers, has turned to the *haute-French* activity of burning cars, as if by way of signaling complicity with the suburban riot. What could be more ecologically sensitive than this?

It is perhaps useful to think of the *Gilets Jaunes* events as an early climate riot, just as we understand much contemporary immigration to be driven by climate collapse. These two problematics — global circulation of populations and ecological crisis — will not simply serve as occasions to consolidate state power but are certain to converge, over the next decade, into something like “green nationalism” through a discourse of resource preservation and purportedly humanitarian provisions against climate refugees. There is no universalism that will not oppose this development through struggles for both open borders and for communal power in matters ecological.

To the Political and Back Again

We have just passed the tenth anniversary of Alexis Rigopoulos’ murder by Greek police and the large-scale riots following. If one were to seek a lift-off to the current cycle of circulation struggles, one might find it in this moment — and in its context, which is global economic crisis and mass unemployment accompanying, conditions particularly acute in Greece which moreover featured an already extant tradition of dynamic social contest. One could not help but admire the militancy of these struggles and, if one were fortunate enough to have some analytical distance, to be frustrated at the repetitive character of the fights with police, the attacks on the House of Parliament. The weakness of the riot that begins from state violence is that it often becomes trapped there. All too often it is managed by cosmetic modifications of state apparatus: a functionary resigns, a blue-ribbon panel is formed, and so on.

The price-setting riot has as its strength that it confronts the economy directly. This is also its weakness, as is clear from the *Gilets Jaunes* movement and how it offers room to move for all manner of objectionable politics, lacking the explicit antiracism and implicit abolitionism of the suburban riot. It opens all too easily onto a revanchist yearning for the class compact of *les trentes glorieuses* with its tunnel vision regarding who was included in the deal; it is now that moment and its exclusions, and not 1792, that is meant when crowds break into “La Marseillaise.”

But one thing that the rise of circulation struggles tells us is that such a moment is not returning, neither for leftists nor for nationalists. For the moment it is worth attending to how swiftly the simple economic demand at the headwaters of the movement overflows its own banks and moves toward political crisis. “The economy” in its contemporary abstraction must in truth be represented by the state. One might loot up and down the Champs-Élysées — that great act of price-setting at price zero — but all understand that Macron’s residence is money’s winter palace. The people do not however wish to speak with him, and this too

is a fundamental strength of the movement. For all the maundering about the meaning of symbols and the placards of protestors, the Gilets Jaunes won their initial demand not via communicative *élan* but through the intensity of direct interventions, from the roundabout blockades to the siege of the Arc de Triomphe, that roundabout at the heart of things. This surely marks that peculiar character of the present, by now well-remarked, wherein “Struggles that might have been moderated by minimal concessions to movement demands (per state strategy during boom times) now find they require insurrectionary force.” This points up the frailty of the CGT, France’s once-mighty labor union, which remains relatively grand in scale but both unwilling and unable to summon the urgencies that current struggles require; their entry into the Gilets Jaunes movement came late and seemed to signal a dying fall.

It may indeed be over. They have won their initial goal. They have begun, moreover, to rediscover the unity of the political and the economic, that underlying truth of social existence which it is the bourgeois fetish to conceal. The persisting energies will now be subject to canalization by electoral parties; there is good reason to fear both this diminution and its outcome. The ledgers and lessons for any left that deserves the name are however apparent enough, and set a clear agenda for the immediate future.

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